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CHARLES DUFRESNY

BY RICHARD ALDINGTON

CHARLES DUFRESNY is worth reading because his *Amusements Sérieux et Comiques* are at once a kind of afterglow of the *Caractères* of La Bruyère and also a precursor of the no less famous *Lettres Persanes* of Montesquieu. That is not to claim that Dufresny is to be considered as an equal with these two masters of French prose, but it is to claim for him a more generous praise than is usually allowed an author who, without any exaggeration, may be described as “practically forgotten”. But a book which suggested to contemporaries, and still suggests, more than one comparison with the *Caractères*, which later critics (among them Voltaire) have pointed out as a source of the *Lettres Persanes*, is not wholly negligible. If there are moments when the *Amusements* too obviously betray the indolence of their author, there are other moments when they are brisk, genial and acute; and always this prose has the ease, the perspicuity, the “elegance” of the late seventeenth century—qualities which were a kind of common heritage to most of the French authors of the time, but are now recaptured by only an Anatole France.

Charles Dufresny was born in 1648 and lived until 1724, his long life covering nearly all the reign of Louis XIV., and extending into the Regency. His origin, says M. Vic, “remonte à un amusement du bon roi Henri,” who discovered a certain “*belle jardinière*” very much to his taste. Some time later she presented his Most Christian Majesty with a son. This son when he grew up was made “*garçon de la chambre du Roi*”—a rather appropriate title—and was the grandfather of our author. Charles Dufresny was born then to all kinds of privileges, among them being a striking resemblance to his royal ancestor, and a happy, facile temperament, which, above all things, disposed its owner to the love of “amusement”.

“*Tout est amusement dans la vie,*” he says, “*la vertu seule*

mérite d'être appelée occupation"; and Dufresny amused himself all through his long life with infinite precautions against the "occupation" of virtue. Even in his childhood he was fortunate enough to "amuse" his cousin, Louis XIV., for whom he had a real affection and who always helped Dufresny until the end of his reign. According to M. Jean Vic, this jester of the *Grand Monarque* could write extremely witty songs for which he wrote the music; he "*savait découper des personages*" (which may mean either silhouettes or cardboard marionettes), and "*les disposer en tableaux comiques*"; and, finally, he designed English gardens "before the English themselves had thought of it"—which was, indeed, clever of him. Moreover, M. Vic continues, Dufresny held it necessary to amuse himself as well as the King. He spent so much money on "costly and original fantasies" that even Louis declared himself powerless to enrich Dufresny; he kept open table and patronized the fine arts, and "he inherited from his great-grandfather a taste for numerous experiments in love". When the King sobered down Dufresny felt impelled to imitate him. He married and was unhappy; the death of his wife in 1688 was, it appears, a happy release for both; these events left their mark in his writings. When the court became more gloomy and severe under Mme. de Maintenon, the "King's Amuser" sold his office of "*huissier de la chambre du Roi*", and went to live in Paris, where to be free from constraint he rented two or three sets of chambers. He gambled furiously and in one of the *tripots* he came across Regnard, with whom he began to write comedies. In five years he had produced or had "a main finger in" no fewer than twelve plays. Unfortunately for Dufresny, the Italian comedians about this time were prohibited from acting, so that the poor man lost both his amusement and his living. By this time his expensive tastes, his amusements, and, above all, his gambling had made him well "acquainted with strange bed-fellows", but as long as the old King lived Dufresny obtained from him both money and protection from creditors. He had a pension of 1,200 *livres* from 1700 onwards, and some years later he was made editor of the *Mercure Galant*. His famous book *Amusements* was first printed as early as 1699, inspired, we are told, by the brilliant conversation he carried on in the coffee-

houses. The end of his life was saddened by the death of his friend and protector Louis XIV., by increasing material difficulties, and probably by that extreme *ennui* and emptiness which old age presents to those who have lived purely for themselves. He died in 1724, having tasted the luxuries of repentance, and, unfortunately, having burned his manuscripts, among them a second part of the *Amusements*.

The first edition (1699) of the *Amusements* is now rare. Pirated editions were issued almost immediately at Amsterdam and Lyons. Dufresny reprinted the book in 1706 and again in 1707 with additions. His plays have several times been reprinted, two as recently as 1920. The only modern book on Dufresny is a thesis by a German named Jomann, which M. Vic says is "*court et sans valeur*"; and an article in *The Review of Modern Languages* appeared in 1911, but "*la documentation est défectueuse*". The information we have derived from M. Vic's preface is therefore more authentic, since he has given great pains and time to collecting accurate biographical material.

The likeness of Dufresny's *Amusements* (and their inferiority) to the *Caractères* will strike the most superficial reader. Under a general heading a number of "thoughts" or observations are gathered together which a less scrupulous author could easily pad into long-winded discourses. Writers like La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, La Bruyère will always attract readers who are weary of mere words, because they have thrown off all the mere ornaments of writing and present only thoughts, stripped and muscular. These collections of maxims, of general ideas derived from long experience and observation of men, justify their popularity, but they must be truly excellent to obtain our admiration. There is no room for mediocrity in this *genre*—which perhaps gives a clue to the neglect of Dufresny. His one improvement on La Bruyère is the invention of a "*Siamois*", who is supposed to visit Paris and to draw curious deductions from the life he observes. This device permitted Dufresny considerable play of thought and satire, gave him opportunities for sly allusions and pretty enigmas, and generally allowed him to introduce at least an appearance of novelty into a kind of book which could hardly please without it, and in which it was extremely difficult to attain.

Even La Bruyère feels he has to apologize for repeating his predecessors. But in La Bruyère and Montesquieu, still more in Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, so many *pensées* are personal and original that the echoes are of small moment—and after all, good sense is always good sense. We can hardly say this for Dufresny; the air of elegant frivolity which he gives his book is small atonement for the essential mediocrity of his mind; if he produces thoughts which strike the reader as just and sensible or just and amusing, there are none which have that quality of universal wisdom and profundity to be found in Pascal and La Rochefoucauld. Dufresny may boast that these two writers were his masters; his better claim to our interest is the device of the Siamese, which may have suggested to Montesquieu the machinery of his *Lettres*, for which the *Amusements* certainly provided more than one hint.

In company with his Siamese (whom Dufresny picks up or drops without a moment's notice as the humor takes him), we are taken on a "tour of the world", to the Court, to the City, to the Palais, among the lawyers and the stalls, to the Opera, to the promenades, among the doctors and the professors; we hear of marriage and gambling, of the *bourgeois* and the public—neither of which are terms of reproach as they are to-day. Sketches of real characters are interspersed with general reflections, and the descriptions of these different scenes of Old Paris are very seldom particular; the idea of "local color" had not yet been born, and the old vigorous picturesque style was, of course, "Gothic" and "barbarous". It would be absurd to look in these *Amusements* for a French equivalent to a racy satire like the *Gull's Horn Book* or a set of sharply particularized portraits of eminent men such as we find in Naunton's *Fragmenta Regalia*. The tone of Dufresny is more like the tone of Steele—witty, but always within the rules, always moral and sensible.

Dufresny's virtues are the virtues of his periods, his faults are his own. Still, he was not without some sharpness. Here is an agreeable variation on his favorite theme: —"*Les uns s'amusent par l'ambition, les autres par l'intérêt, les autres par l'amour; les hommes du commun par les plaisirs, les grands hommes par la gloire, et moi je m'amuse à considérer que tout cela n'est qu'amusement.*"

“*Encore une fois tout est amusement dans la vie; la vie même n'est qu'un amusement, en attendant la mort.*” In spite of his eternal “amusement” Dufresny had stripped himself of numerous illusions. The Court, he tells us, is a most amusing place. It has good air; its avenues are smiling and agreeable to walk in, and they all tend to the same point: “*Et ce point, c'est la fortune.*” Follow several pungent little passages exposing the covetousness of the “*noblesse de cour*”, where “the great” sacrifice their life and their peace of mind either from duty or ambition, while for the “*subalternes, ramper et demander, c'est tout leur menège*”. The Parisians are equally incapable of attention and of patience, they have no time either to see or to hear, they will work twenty-four hours to *assaisonner* the pleasure of a moment, their passions are keen but they enjoy the comforts of indolence—*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Dufresny has few illusions about the law, and none about lawyers and litigants; the inhabitants of the Opéra are “*des peuples un peu bizarres; ils ne parlent qu'en chantant, ne marchent qu'en dansant, et font souvent l'un et l'autre lorsqu'ils en ont le moins d'envie.*” He lets off a prodigious amount of steam on the topic of women, “*des oiseaux amusants . . . volages d'inclination, faibles de tempérament, et fortes en ramage,*” but after a few pages he pulls himself up with this reflection:— “*. . . c'est une chose étrange, qu'on ne puisse parler des femmes avec une juste modération; on en dit toujours trop ou trop peu: on ne parle pas assez des femmes vertueuses, et l'on parle trop de celles qui ne le sont pas.*” In this airy fashion, we are piloted about rather like country cousins in charge of an amiable cynic, who can do nothing but chatter and whose chatter includes for our benefit all the jokes he has evolved in the last year. It is brilliant, facile, good-mannered, and above all amusing, and fitted with quick strokes of character—from the “sot” who is so vain that the wits break their shafts uselessly on this “wall of brass” to the truly modest women who “*ne lève les yeux que pour voir si les autres femmes sont aussi modestes qu'elle.*”

RICHARD ALDINGTON.